

30SHORTGRASS. DOC

Three days of the July trip to Santa Fe passed adjusting to watching the stage instead of the audience at plays and concerts. The isolation of the shortgrass country accelerates interest in city folks and leads to gawking the way primates stare through bars in zoos at runny-nosed kids in pink gym suits proctored by parents wearing red and yellow plaid pants under blousy tee-shirts emblazoned with: "Slept on the Beach at Saint Marie."

The second night in town, we bought tickets to a top of the toe Flamenco dance. The troupe performed weekly at a hotel, starring an internationally ranked manager and dancers. The seats swiveled like desk chairs. I planted my feet to keep my attention focused on the stage. Flamenco stirs young people, along with other actions beginning with acrobat acts and ending in xylophone concerts. One part in the program emphasized understanding and appreciating interpretive dance.

Interpretive dance sure wasn't a mystery applied to my generation back in the old days in Mertzon and Barnhart. We danced, jigged, waltzed, and jitterbugged, on flat places, slabs on rodeo grounds, slabs away from rodeo grounds, living rooms, and the one cafe having a floor on the Mertzon-Barnhart Highway.

I was determined to look straight at the stage. But on the second row to the right, four seats from the aisle, a redheaded gent started nibbling on a blonde girl's left ear at such a pitch his tattoos glowed blue and red in the dim setting.

My companion focused on the stage. I needed her advice — needed contact. Hearing aids do not monitor whispers or intercept whispering. The ravages of age on the digital joints deter concise sign language. Once before the end of the railroad era, tapping the Morse Code with a swizzle stick on a shot glass would have worked, but only with a depot agent or a Scoutmaster to receive.

The strain began to show. The chair armrests became clammy with perspiration from gripping the plastic cover. Effect from the visual fixation on the bottom of the stage's rail raged so intense that the eyes locked, focused like a prairie owl staring at an enemy. Minutes, possibly seconds, before optical paralysis struck, music blared and dancers clacked over the boards in a staccato of sputtering rhythm, breaking the spell.

Relieved (spared) of eave-peeping lust or spying on the young — take your choice — I calculated how often I required seeing a Flamenco performance. The last one I saw

before Santa Fe was in 1960 in Madrid on a trip with a busload of agriculture journalists in Spain.

The hotel engaged the heavy end of a local troupe, I think, to increase the impact of the steps, to override the scribes all talking at once before, during and after each act. By "heavy end" it might be better to say that if the six dancers weighed a tad more apiece they'd have been better prospects for the intermission at the bull ring instead of stage dancing.

As I remember, the Spanish dancers put on a clattering, classical act with much heel stamping, back kicking, and twirling of bright skirts. But in those days, the only dance recital ever held back home was Miss Lucy Benson's end of school recital for the first grade, and her show fell during spring work.

Apart from being shocked at the concerts, the narrow sidewalks stayed thick with visitors dragging recalcitrant kids by one hand and hanging loose with the other to stiff-arm a path for space to move. Such a huge crowd congregated one day, circling and cutting across the main plaza, that the sight from the second floor of the art museum brought back Mr. J. Frank Dobie's account of a trail hand who rode into a mill of a thousand storm-crazed cattle.

From my vantage, the mountain thunder showers formed gray towering walls extending above the tip of the Cathedral steeple's cross on up. Spreading way up the slope of the range, crisscrossed with lightning flashes and resounding in thunderous rock-crackling strikes.

Before the first drops sent the masses scurrying to Starbuck's, the hotel lobbies, the shop fronts and the ancient once five and dime store, a faint memory of the painting of a mounted Roman soldier arose, riding a white charger into swarms of rusty, ragged peasants, swinging a broad-bladed sword, trying to drive the foolish wretches from the impending doom of an erupting volcano. (Solitude on the ranchlands causes wild imagery equal to nightmares resulting from eating too much before going to bed.)

Before rain ended visibility I spotted one movement to the cover of the big cut stone cathedral plastered in thick adobe (don't check this). In trailed black figures that I imagined, and suspected, to be sainted ladies wearing black shawls, unafraid of the storms from the mountains but wary of the plaza. The sight of the faithful tempered the dread of the storm.